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ABSTRACT

Introduction to Education is the first course students take in the teacher preparation program at Purdue University. It provides an opportunity for students to experience teaching early in their teacher education program. The course consists of a field-based and a campus-based component. The field-based component consists of 10 observations of a local teacher's classroom over the course of a semester with the student assisting and participating as a teacher. The campus-based component addresses the theoretical aspects of learning to teach. Historically, the practical field-based component was dissociated from the theoretical campus-based component. The practical lessons encountered in the privacy of local classrooms were difficult to incorporate into the public space of the campus-based discussion. The practical quality of the field experience juxtaposed against the theoretical quality of the campus discussion resulted in poor student evaluations, indicating that the theoretical discussion lacked relevance. This paper reflects on the experiences of a new visiting assistant professor coordinating the course. (Contains 18 references.) (CCM)

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Integrating Field Experience and Classroom Discussions: Vignettes as Vehicles for Reflection

by

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INTEGRATING FIELD EXPERIENCE AND CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS: VIGNETTES AS VEHICLES FOR REFLECTION

Mark J. Volkmann, Purdue University

Introduction to Education (EDCI 204B) is the first course students take in the teacher preparation program at Purdue University. It was created in 1978 to provide an opportunity for students to experience teaching early in their teacher education program. The course consisted of two parts: a field-based and a campus-based component. The field-based component consisted of ten observations of a local teacher's classroom over the course of a semester, where the student assisted and participated as a teacher. The campus-based component dealt with the theoretical aspects of learning to teach. Activities included discussions of reading and writing assignments; videos of teaching; and guest speakers on educational issues.

Historically, the practical field-based component was dissociated from the theoretical campus-based component. The practical lessons encountered in the privacy of local classrooms were difficult to incorporate into the public space of the campus-based discussion. The practical quality of the field experience juxtaposed against the theoretical quality of the campus discussion resulted in poor student evaluations indicating that the theoretical discussions lacked relevance.

In 1992, as a new visiting assistant professor, I was offered the opportunity to coordinate Introduction to Education (EDCI 204B). I accepted the challenge on the condition that I would have the freedom and the support to re-create a course that bridged the theory/practice gap. I

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realized from my own experience as an undergraduate in teacher education that students value experience in classrooms above all other forms of teacher education instruction (Russell and Munby, 1994). My goal was to integrate the meaningfulness of the field experience into the campus based sessions through reflection on those experiences.

My desire to create an introductory education class that was both useful and meaningful turned out to be far more difficult than I anticipated. On the surface, the problem was simple to solve: develop and implement a new curriculum that contained opportunities for discussion and reflection about field experiences. Beneath the surface lurked the problems associated with privacy, confidentiality, ego, and my own approach to teaching others to teach. My initial attempts to re-define the course focused on the surface changes of re-defining curriculum. After trying and failing over three iterations of the course, I began to suspect what Pogo has now made infamous, "I have met the enemy and the enemy is me."

My story of reform is self revealing. Through it I describe the mistakes I made and my recognition of a possible solution. In the next section I describe my action research approach as I investigated new strategies and my own values and beliefs about teaching and learning to teach.

Action Research Methodology

Initially, I chose action research because I wanted to implement new teaching and learning strategies within my own classroom. Action research provided tools I could use to document the success of my efforts. As my understanding of the complexity of my endeavor deepened, I continued to use action research because it assisted my introspective effort to examine my own attitudes and beliefs about learning to teach. My overarching goal was to

awaken students to their own attitudes, values, and beliefs about teaching to enable them to act upon them. Hiding within that goal I discovered a lesson: do not expect your students to do what you are unwilling to do. In retrospect, I see that my research proceeded in two phases: (A) an extrospective phase that focused on finding the right strategy to stimulate my students' thinking about their values, attitudes, and beliefs about teaching; and (B) an introspective phase that focused on my own values, attitudes, and beliefs about teaching. In both phases (extrospective and introspective), my efforts were directed toward addressing four questions posed by Elliott (1991):

1. What is the initial idea?
2. What changes should be made?
3. What do I hope to achieve? (The plan)
4. What counts as evidence of success?

My approach agreed with Elliott (1991) when he said, "theories are not validated independently and then applied to practice. They are validated through practice" (p. 69). What I learned through practice and about practice is shared below.

What is the Initial Idea?

Prior to my coordination of the course, students had no opportunity to share their field experience with their peers or their section instructor. Furthermore, no attempt was made to

connect campus-based discussion topics with the problems, concerns, or successes students experienced in the field. Reading assignments were un-connected to the observation experience; journal entries were rarely shared with other students; and writing assignments were one-way communications to the instructor. There are two problems associated with the compartmentalization of the two course components. First, compartmentalization resulted in a missed opportunity to examine, reflect, and learn from the practice of teaching through campus-based social interactions. Second, compartmentalization re-enforces the code of silence that protects the teaching profession self-criticism and reform.

What Should be Changed? -- A History of Reform

What I hoped to accomplish was the integration of field experiences into the campus-based sessions. From my reading of the observational journals I knew the students' field experiences provided entrance to a variety of issues and problems. The difficulty was that the students experienced these issues and problems in the context of their individual field experience. That is, because no two students attended the same field experience, i.e. issues and problems were experienced privately. For this reason, the journal served as the perfect vehicle for discussion of events: it retained the private quality of the experience, but because that experience was written, it was possible to transport the experience to class for later discussion. I hoped the classroom discussion could provide students with ways to resist the professional

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isolation experienced by classroom teachers. I hoped to find ways to talk about teaching actions without students feelings vulnerable and exposed or feeling like they were divulging inequities experienced in their field observation.

The journal required students to write descriptions of what happened during each school visit and to reflect on those observations as they placed themselves in the role of teacher. The students wrote about a variety of topics such as: student mis-behavior, the teacher's sense of humor, the classroom atmosphere, monitoring makeup tests, tutoring students, the difficulty of explaining information, and how their teacher represented the role of the teacher. The journal writing also provided a private link between the student and their campus-based instructor. The journal was a good place for students to privately air their judgements about teaching, learning, the teacher's competence, and students' abilities. My first revision focused on the journal writing.

Semester I

I decided one way to transport what was meaningful in the field experience into the campus-based discussions was to use the journal writing exercises as a focus for the class discussions. I hoped the private link between instructor and student could continue, but I also hoped to make the individual experiences available to the larger class-sized audience. Out of respect for our school-based colleagues, I asked the students not to use the name of the students, teachers, or school in their writing or in our discussions.

I encountered two problems. First, the intimacy/vulnerability of the private journal was diminished by making it part of a public forum. Students no longer felt free to air their questions or vent their frustrations. When the audience changed, so did the nature of their writing. As a result, students did not feel safe when they were asked to write for this new audience. Second, each student's experience was so varied that I was unable to isolate common themes for discussion. Some students focused on technical problems, some on practical problems, and others on emancipatory problems (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1993). I felt overwhelmed by the diversity of the observations and unable to focus class discussion in a way that included everyone.

Semester II

In the next semester, I decided to continue to use the journal for class discussions. I strongly believed that the journal was the best vehicle to integrate the two course components. Unfortunately, the strength of my belief blinded me to the students' need for private conversation. In order to focus class discussions I provided a structure to guide student writings in terms of similar field-based events. The writing guides consisted of weekly themes that directed students to reflect and write on special education, multicultural education, classroom atmosphere, and assessment. I hoped this structure would provide a thematic strand I could link to assigned readings. I especially hoped the themes would focus class discussions on student experience.

The first problem I encountered was that the themes were rarely coincident with the students' experiences. For example, on days when students were to observe events associated with special education, nothing significant would happen involving special education. The second problem I encountered was dull writing. I believe that my requirement to write about a particular topic and to publicly share the writing caused students to filter what they shared with the entire class. The observation journals became little more than daily logs (Thomas, 1995). Finally, I realized that public sharing and structured themes had damaged one of the most successful assignments of the course.

What I learned from these two semesters of attempted change was that transporting classroom observations into campus-based discussion was extremely difficult. I confirmed that teaching is a private and personal endeavor that is difficult to share. As I planned for the third semester of reform, I vowed to dispense with the thematic writing guides and to return the journal to its former private status. This decision left me in doubt about what vehicle I could use to transport field experience into the class discussions.

Semester III

For the third revision I decided to focus on educational case studies (Shulman, 1992; McAninch, 1993). I toyed with the idea of assigning students to write their own case studies, however, Shulman's (1992) description of the difficulties she experienced in teaching teachers how to write cases convinced me that it was beyond the scope of the course. Instead, I selected a

variety of cases from Silverman & Lyon (1991) that were consistent with the themes I had previously chosen to guide the journal writing. I felt that case studies would provide a set of common experiences that could serve as the central focus for classroom discussion. In an effort to re-capture the positive aspects of the field experience and make them part of the campus based discussion, I instituted a fifteen minute period of informal small group conversations about field experiences each week. In effect, this gave the students time to swap stories and to confirm their experience with one another. However, these discussions seldom resulted in prolonged reflection, discussion, or journal writing. At best, these sessions helped students confirm what they thought, rarely were they pushed to reconsider their beliefs.

There were a number of problems with this third revision. First, my decision to use case studies to focus class discussions dispensed with my original goal to integrate the field-based experiences into the campus-based discussions. Reading about the field experiences of others dismissed the relevancy of the students' own field experiences. Second, when students compared what they read to what they experienced, they came away feeling the case studies were flat and contrived. Third, oral sharing of field experience was an important activity because it gave students an opportunity to validate their own experience without feeling judged. However, because these experiences were only shared in small groups, there was little opportunity to use these experiences to guide reflection and to question initial beliefs.

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What do I hope to achieve? (The plan)

I felt discouraged and unable to come to grips with how to achieve my goal to integrate personal experience with group discussion and reflection. The difficulty students expressed was that they did not want to publicly compromise their relationship with their supervising teacher or their field-based students, and they did not want to publicly divulge their own fears, frustrations, concerns, and questions. The students' feelings matched my own. It seemed to me that the journal provided my only access to students' field-based experiences. Realizing the folly in making journals public, I opted for an antiseptic approach by using case studies. The problem I faced with case studies was that by using them I ignored the students' real experiences.

My goal to integrate the relevancy and meaningfulness of the field experience into the classroom discussions had failed. I was caught in a Catch-22. My efforts were focused on teaching students through their social construction of meaning from field experience. This effort was in direct conflict with the widely held belief that teaching is a private and personal act. My social constructionist approach pitted the public nature of learning against the private nature of teaching.

Until now, all of my attention was directed toward the curriculum--I had not considered my own role or the roles I scripted for my students. My awakening to this concern was initiated by reading of Paolo Friere's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). It helped me to focus on my

own values, attitudes, and beliefs about teaching by introducing me to the banking concept and the problem-centered concept of teaching.

The banking concept was a metaphor Friere (1970) used to describe traditional pedagogy. Under this concept the teacher holds all the wealth of knowledge and distributes it to the impoverished students. Friere described the banker teacher as the one who "chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it" (p. 54). By maintaining a tight grip over the curriculum, I had ignored the most powerful teaching idea at my disposal--posing relevant problems. Unknowingly, I had supported what I abhorred--the banking concept of education. Problem-posing placed the student in the central position of deciding what questions they wished to address. According to Friere's view, "the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but [the] one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach (p. 61)."

Friere's words helped me reconceptualization my dual role as teacher/student. Embracing a problem-posing approach meant replacing my teacher-centeredness with student concerns. This approach replaced professor knowledge (as the stuff to learn) with student knowledge (as the stuff to analyze and inform practice). Placing student concerns over instructor choice meant re-evaluating my role in the class. This was a slow process because it meant my own professional identity was at stake (Volkmann & Anderson, In Press). By giving up my teacher-centered expertise, I also gave up my security of knowing the answers to all the

questions. I exchanged that security for casting myself in the position of reflective practitioner who struggled along with the students to find the best solutions to pedagogical problems. It meant giving up contrived problems for real-world problems. I realized that if I wanted the class to change, then I had to change. My beliefs about teaching and learning and my role as professional educator had to change (Cohen & Ball, 1990). As I challenged my own thinking about my role as teacher, I challenged my students' thinking about their role as student.

Based on this new perspective, I decided on three new directions for the course: change the purpose of the course; involve students in the selection of readings; and conceptualize a new field-based assignment that embodied my reconceptualization: the vignette. My hope was to help students develop reflection as a habit of mind that could result in changed thinking and doing.

Fourth Revision: Implementing of a Problem-Centered Pedagogy

The old purpose of the course was to give students an opportunity to experience teaching in order to help them make an informed decision about becoming a teacher. I realized early in my work that the vast majority of students believed they could be successful at teaching. Few students changed their minds as a result of the course. If a student had a good experience with their supervising teacher, then they had no reason to change their minds. If they had a poor experience with their supervising teacher, then they used this experience as an example of what not to do as a future teacher.

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I recognized that the power of the field experience was its potential for teaching students about themselves and about teaching. Simply experiencing the field experience did not teach the students about themselves. Unless students examined their field experiences critically as a problem-posing experience, then the introspective, educational value of that experience would be lost. This new purpose recognized and respected the field experience as a paradoxical event: one that was experienced privately by everyone in the class. What I needed to do was to create an atmosphere within the classroom where students could share what was personally trouble-some without feeling personally vulnerable or at risk.

The power of the field experience was its potential for teaching students about themselves and about teaching. Simply experiencing the field experience did not help students understand themselves or challenge their thinking. Unless students examined their field experiences critically as a problem-posing experience, then the introspective, educational value of that experience would be lost. This new purpose recognized and respected the field experience as a paradoxical event: one that was experienced privately by everyone in the class. What I needed to do was to create an atmosphere within the classroom where students could share what was personally trouble-some without feeling personally vulnerable or at risk.

What Ethical Issues are Associated With the Use of Vignettes?

The ethical issues are complex. They involve a variety of beliefs about the teacher's right to privacy, professional respect, the sanctity of the classroom, and feeling valued. Discussing vignettes of local classroom events in university classrooms is potentially dangerous. However, if done with care, the risks of creating ethical dilemmas is reduced.

Teachers value their classroom privacy. The history of this privacy has been well documented (Jackson, 1968; Lortie, 1975; Waller, 1932/1961). Liebermann and Miller (1992) found that teachers enjoyed working in private because their mistakes remain hidden. The teachers who volunteer for the field experience program know in advance that practicum students will be discussing classroom events. The nature of these discussions is communicated to these teachers. The purpose of the written assignments and follow-up discussions is to help students develop and maintain a reflective attitude about teaching. I describe the vignette assignment to participating teachers and I assure them that the names of teachers, students, and schools are not used in the writing or in the discussions. Furthermore, I assure them that the primary focus is on events rather than on the teacher. In the three semesters I have used vignette assignments, I have experienced no negative reaction from any of the 100 teachers who host our students.

Implications For the Use of Vignettes in A Problem-Centered Approach to Teacher Education

The vignette assignment in concert with a problem-centered approach to teacher education may be illustrated more clearly if compared to a teacher centered/traditional approach to teacher education. Traditional teacher education programs do not help students examine their underlying assumptions about teaching. These implicit (hidden) assumptions are what make students feel they already know how to teach. Unless these assumptions are challenged, students' implicit beliefs remain hidden and students enter teaching feeling their role as student is similar to their role as teacher.

The traditional model of teacher education implies that teacher educators know their students' implicit beliefs. The problem-centered approach places the task of finding solutions in the hands of future teachers. By expecting these future teachers to reflect on their experience, to question naive conceptions of teaching, to provide expert analysis, and to develop personal theories they are learning a life-long habit of reflection (Connelly, & Clandinin, 1985).

The purposes of traditional reform are for the improvement of institutional practices--curriculum, management, communications, testing, writing behavioral objectives, etc. The purposes of reform in problem-centered teacher education is for teachers to develop theoretical attitudes that address teaching dilemmas and search for personal/professional solutions. Furthermore, teachers and students are looked on as equals in the pursuit of rational practice, and teaching and learning are treated as interchangeable terms.

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The traditional research program is objective in nature, working toward certain generalizable procedures that can be adopted whole-scale through institutional reform. The problem-centered research program is individual and subjective. It works toward the education of individuals who are not only interested in solving immediate problems, but are interested in learning more about self and addressing moral problems. The research is personal in nature and is focused on real-time problems. This research is cyclical, never-ending, and product-less (hermeneutic).

Traditional assessment of future teachers consists of checklists of expertise and descriptions of skills all teachers must possess. Problem-centered assessment explores the future teacher's practice of reflection and seeks ways to embed assessment into the learning activities.

Traditional teacher education programs look upon field placements as damaging and undoing all the habits and attitudes central to the campus-based work. Problem-centered teacher education hopes to involve host teachers in the same discussions of problem identification and resolution by inviting teachers to reflect on the problems they identify.

Characteristic	Traditional	Problem-Posing
Beliefs	The teacher educator disregards student beliefs and tells students what to know and believe.	The student identifies his/her beliefs about teaching and reflects on them.
Reform	Work to improve institutionalized practices.	Address teaching dilemmas and search for personal and professional solutions.
Research	Work toward generalizable procedures that can be adopted whole-scale through institutional reform.	Work is personal in nature and is focused on real-time problems.
Assessment	Traditional assessment of future teachers consists of checklists of expertise and descriptions of skills all teachers must possess.	Problem-centered assessment explores the future teacher's practice of reflection and seeks ways to embed assessment into the learning activities.
Field Experience	Field placement is damaging and undoes all the habits and attitudes central to the campus-based work.	Field placement invites host teachers to reflect on the problems identified by practicum students.

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Example #1: Staying On Task

I was observing in a class in a relatively large school. The students in the class are mostly freshmen. The class is first year biology and many of the students are obviously not paying attention to the class lesson. Mr. Q is a student teacher in the class and the students are supposed to be doing a lesson using a computers. One particular student was messing around with the computer and distracting the students around him. He was not doing the lesson as he should have been. The student teacher asked him twice to stay "on task" and to finish the lesson. The teacher explained that the questions at the end of the lesson would be on the exam. The student looked at the student teacher and laughed and said that biology is not important and neither was the lesson they were doing. The teacher sat down next to the student and gave him a quiet reprimand and explained to him the importance of the computer lesson. As soon as the teacher left the student was again fooling around and hitting the keys. He looked at me to see if I was watching. The teacher again sat next to the student and did not leave until the student had completed one part of the lesson. The student did not do well on the quiz at the end of the lesson. It turned out that the student simply did not understand the material and that is why he did not want to do the lesson.

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Question: How can a teacher tell if a student is acting up because he does not understand the lesson or if there is another reason involved?

The Problem: A student is banging on the computer keys. His actions disrupt other students, disrupt the teacher, and show disregard for school property. Some teachers might respond to the behavior without looking for the cause. The trouble-maker is acting out because he does not understand the computer lesson. Unfortunately, he has chosen to demonstrate his need for help through his negative actions. I believe that students should never be punished for learning problems. Punishment will not help him learn. On the other hand, this kind of disruptive behavior should not go unaddressed.

My response: (Approaching the student privately and speaking quietly) "You are disturbing other students and you have disturbed my attention to their needs. Do not bang on the computer keys. If you need help, raise your hand. Now, since I am here, I will help you get started."

Example #2: Right Or Wrong

After Mrs. H had passed out the exam that the class had taken a few days earlier, one student asked for her to clarify something on her paper. As Mrs. H. looked at the paper, the student pointed out that a correct answer was marked wrong. (When Mrs. H. grades papers, she marks through the incorrect answer and puts the correct one next to it.) Since it was close to the end of the period, Mrs. H. agreed to look at it later. When I came in during her prep period, she

showed the paper to me and asked for my opinion. I could not tell whether the pencil marks were on top of the red ink or visa versa, Since it was hard for both of us to tell with the naked eye, Mrs. H. decided to look at it through a magnifying glass. In our minds, however, we both doubted that the student had the correct answer before because why would a teacher mark out an answer and put the same one next to it. After inspecting the answer under the magnifying glass, Mrs. H. knew that the pencil marks were on top of the red ink so the answer was in fact wrong. The student was a little upset that she did not get away with cheating, but she will probably think twice before doing that again.

Question: To what extent should a teacher go to determine whether or not a student has changed an answer after a paper has been graded? What would you have done?

Example #3: A Stroll in the Classroom

Mrs. A was giving a leaf identification test, The best way she felt to give the test was to pass the specimens around the room, giving the students approximately a minute to answer the coordinating question. This method works if the students are willing to follow directions and listen to the teacher. It is common knowledge that during a test students should not get out of their seats and walk around the classroom, Student X did that very thing. He got out of his seat during the test and strolled around the classroom until Mrs. A saw him. She told him to pass in his paper and return to his seat because it was apparent that he was finished with his test. He told her he would sit down. The test paper wasn't handed in, and no other action was taken to punish him for not following basic testing procedures.

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Question: Do students learn to follow directions when no action is taken if they don't? Is anything learned from hollow threats?